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PLAN FOR EFFECTING  
A UNIFORM ORTHOGRAPHY  
OF THE  
SOUTH-AFRICAN DIALECTS.

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THE following communication, sent to us by the writers, may serve to explain the plan for effecting a uniform orthography of the South-African dialects, to which allusion is made in the Proceedings of the Society published in this volume.\*

“To the Missionaries and Friends of education among the Aborigines of Southern Africa.

“DEAR BRETHREN AND FRIENDS:

“The undersigned, fellow laborers with yourselves in efforts to enlighten and elevate the benighted sons of Africa, send greeting, and would desire respectfully to address you on a point which seems to us to be one of common interest, and of more than ordinary importance, ss. the subject of *a uniform orthography for writing each and all the Aboriginal dialects of Africa, South of the Mountains of the Moon.*”

After alluding to the fact that “there seems to be little or no doubt that all the tribes of Southern Africa, extending from the southern coast as far as about 5° N. Lat.,—the Hottentots and Bushmen excepted—speak but various dialects of fundamentally the same language;” and to the important bearing of the subject of reducing these dialects to writing upon the christianization of Africa, the letter proceeds:

“And here it is important to state briefly, that by *uniform orthography* we mean, that a given character or letter have but one and the same value ascribed to it, and that a given sound which is common to all the dialects, be represented uniformly and universally by one and the same character in all said dialects; or in other words, that one and the same character

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\* See p. xvii.

be employed to represent one and the same sound wherever that sound exists; and that one and the same peculiar character which is thought to be necessary to represent any peculiar sound, or a sound which is not common to all the dialects, be always employed to represent that same peculiar or limited sound, wherever it exists among any of the tribes.

“The *attainment* of such a system we think quite *practicable*. It might not require any great deviation from the system which most or all of us may have adopted already in our respective fields of labor. If we have all adopted the Roman characters, then we have a common basis which might require only some slight modifications, additions, or alterations, to make it uniform—all of which could be readily known and regulated, if all parties would obligingly volunteer their services in something like the following manner, which brings us to our next point.

“The *plan* or mode of operation which we would propose is this. Let each mission, as the London, Wesleyan, Scotch Free Church, Glasgow, French, Berlin, Rhenish, Moravian, Norwegian, American, the Church, &c.,—each and every respective mission in Africa, South of the Mountains of the Moon, appoint a Committee from its own number, whose duty it shall be to prepare an article on the elementary sounds of the dialect of the people among whom they labor; giving, as far as possible, all of said sounds, and also the system of orthography which has been adopted in writing the language, or the system which seems to them sufficient, and best fitted for that and the neighboring dialects. And let them add such other remarks upon the people, their character, customs, relations, &c., as may have a bearing upon the subject, or be of general ethnological value. And let all these articles be sent to some one or two individuals learned and interested in such pursuits, who, (with others, should it be thought expedient to enlarge the number,) shall constitute a Committee, whose duty it shall be to compare said articles, and deduce from them and other sources at their command, such a system of uniform orthography as they may deem best fitted to the South-African tongues, and to report the same to all the parties from which they received articles on the subject.

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“It is not to be denied that there are difficulties in the way of such an undertaking. Many of the parties whose co-operation is required are far removed, and the means of inter-communication may be irregular or unfrequent; and among some there may be a lack of interest in the matter. But things more difficult and of much less value than this, have been attempted and accomplished; and it is believed that there is noth-

ing in the case before us which resolution, promptness and effort will not overcome. And why should there be a want of interest on the subject in any mind to whom it holds even the most distant relation, especially in any Missionary in Africa, or in any one who would see her inhabitants enlightened and blessed? In every part of the civilized world all classes of men are studying to rid their affairs of all possible friction; shall the servants of God in Africa make no efforts to keep pace with the progressive spirit of the age? \* \* \* \* \*

“Before closing, we may glance at some of the *advantages* which might be expected from such a uniform system of orthography, and from the efforts to obtain it.

“And it is no small consideration, that the very *means* by which we could secure the great end, *may themselves be made an end of pre-eminent value*. For, the prosecution of the measure proposed may be made a happy medium for increasing and diffusing much light and knowledge in respect to the geographical position, the laws, customs, and moral character of all nations under consideration. It would also, without doubt, develop more fully the resemblances and differences between the several branches of the great family of African tongues; and it might correct some prevalent errors in respect to them. Further, the plan proposed would lead to a more thorough study of these languages, and would multiply facilities for studying them to the best advantage. For the measure cannot be accomplished without much careful observation and study of the people of Africa, their character and language, in different parts of the continent, and that too by men best qualified and best situated for the work. And the result of this observation and study must be noted down. And let a summary of these results be communicated by the Committee to all the missions and individuals who shall have furnished articles, and who will say that such individuals will not then have greater facilities for the further study of the language? And would not these considerations alone be an equivalent for all the labor and pains which the whole enterprise might involve?

“Another advantage to be expected would be—what has been already alluded to—a *better system of orthography*. It would secure all the necessary facts and examples, the opinions of the best judges, and finally call to our aid a Committee, whose impartiality, good judgment, and great learning would abundantly qualify them to act in the case. None to whom this paper is addressed, can be ignorant of the difficulties attending the phonography and orthography of a new and barbarous tongue; nor can any be insensible to the importance of a simple, natural and per-

fect system, and the introduction of the same at the earliest stage of writing the language and instructing the people.

“Again, a uniform system of orthography *would make all books, printed in the languages, much more valuable*, by making them more extensively intelligible, and opening the way for a wider use and circulation of them. By adopting different systems of orthography, books in one dialect may be no better than sealed to those speaking another dialect, though the difference in the two dialects may be so slight that the natives of each tribe have no difficulty in being mutually understood in all oral communications. More than this—two Missionary Societies in the same field and among the same people (by adopting different systems of orthography) may each render all their books quite unintelligible to the common reader taught by the other Society. Nor are these imaginary cases. But let all cognate dialects be reduced and written upon a common system, and the labor of preparing books is greatly diminished, while the value of each book is much increased.

“Again, the measure proposed would open a *natural and easy way of enlarging and enriching the various dialects of Southern Africa*. Each dialect is exceedingly barren of many important words; while each has some of its own which do not belong to others. “The Kafirs, for instance, have a word to express ‘king,’ in distinction from ‘chief,’ which the Zulus have not; and another tribe has a word for ‘concubine’ which is found neither among the Zulus nor Kafirs. Such words having the native form and prefix, could be easily transferred from one tribe to another; and this transfer would seem vastly better than to introduce from the Hebrew or Greek, the English or Dutch, words which must have a prefix added, perhaps a vowel added at the end, and two or three other vowels inserted, in order to separate what would otherwise be, to a native, unpronounceable consonants. A word thus introduced is at best but a barbarous intruder, more ugly, less intelligible, and far less expressive, than a native word would be, even though a visitant from another tribe.” [*Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. I. No. iv.*] One dialect may be very meagre in some of the most desirable qualities of style, aside from mere words, while another dialect may have some of these, but be deficient in some excellence which the former possesses. A uniform orthography would facilitate mutual import and export, and furnish reciprocal aid. And by various natural and consequent modifications and improvements, the grand result of a much more copious, flexible and in every respect complete language might be obtained for all the tribes of Southern Africa. And the advantages of such a result for

translating the Scriptures, and for all religious as well as other purposes, are too evident to require enumeration. It is a kind of improvement which African languages greatly need, and to which all the best languages have ever been much indebted for their beauty and utility.

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“Very respectfully yours in the cause of truth,

|               |                                                               |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| LEWIS GROUT,  | } Committee in behalf of<br>the American Mission<br>at Natal. |
| J. C. BRYANT, |                                                               |
| H. A. WILDER, |                                                               |
| N. ADAMS,     |                                                               |
| J. L. DOHNE,  |                                                               |

Port Natal, March 6, 1850.”

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## HINTS

ON THE INTRODUCTION OF

## BUDDHISM INTO BURMAH.

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THE following letter, dated Maulmain, November 14, 1850, is from Rev. Francis Mason, Missionary of the American Baptist Union in Burmah, to the Corresponding Secretary.

MY DEAR SIR,

\* \* \* \* \* “Though a stranger, it has occurred to me that a ray or two of light that I can cast on the subject of the introduction of Buddhism into Burmah, would not be unacceptable to you. ‘Sôvanabhûmi’ you say, ‘I am unable to identify.’\* That is Pegu. The Burmese books say that Asoka sent Onktaratera and Thannatera to ‘Umwonna-bungmi, which, they say, is the country of Tha-tung, or Sa-tung, as it would be pronounced in Pali and Sanscrit. The ruins of Tha-tung, with its innumerable pagodas, still remain between the mouths of the Salwen, and the Setaing rivers, about half a day’s journey west of Martaban. It is, I think, beyond doubt the oldest seat of Buddhism in Burmah. Asoka’s missionaries are said to have introduced the religion of Gautama into Tha-tung in the year 236, or eighteen years after the third great council was held.† A. D. 386, the people appear to have been zealous for Buddhism, inasmuch as it is recorded that Bugdagotha, or

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\* See *Journal of Am. Or. Soc.*, vol. i. p. 100, ff.—COMM. OF PUBL.

† The year mentioned is, of course, of the Buddhist era.—COMM. OF PUBL.